# GARY GIBERSON

**As told to German Georgieff**

Gary Giberson, longtime mayor of Port Republic, was born in 1935. His family has lived in Port Republic since 1680. His life has always been intertwined with the Atlantic White Cedar. His father and grandfather operated a sawmill that specialized in milling boat lumber. It was one of the few mills in the state that could handle up to 30-foot-long logs. Boards of this length were prized for garvey sides.

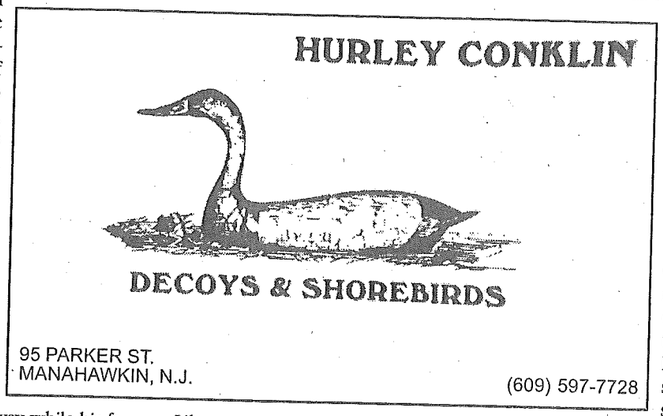
The waste slabs left over after sawing the logs were used by decoy carvers. Gary stresses that all decoys carved up to the 1940s were made from such slabs, not sawn lumber. Not only was the lumber sawn from logs considered too valuable for such a use, but also the sapwood, which made up most of the slab, was better suited to decoy construction. As a youth, Gary met many now-famous carvers who got cedar from the Giberson mill, such as Hurley Conklin, Mark Kears, Gene Hendrickson and Jake Barrett.

He also would tag along on cedar deliveries to boat builders. Sometimes, if the delivery involved more than one trip, Gary's father would let him stay at the boat shop if he promised to keep out of the way, while his father went back to the mill for more lumber. During the time spent at these shops, Gary observed and learned many of the hand tool skills used by the builders. They would sometimes let him bore a hole or plane a board, correcting his methods along the way.

One such builder, Gene Hendrickson, did not recognize Gary when he turned up for a job years later. Gary, who always had a fondness for cars, showed up in a used Cadillac. Gene stated that someone driving a car like that didn't need a job from him. Gary persisted, offering to even work a few hours for free, to prove his abilities. Gene relented and while looking over Gary's tools, the topic of decoys came up, which caught Gene's attention. Finally, after asking who he was, Hendrickson realized Gary was the same boy who used to hang around the shop while his father and grandfather were delivering boat lumber. Needless to say, Gary earned new respect in Gene's eyes, and got the job.

Gary got started carving after his father's rig was stolen from their favorite hunting spot, which was a rare event in those days. His father replaced them with a rig of black ducks purchased at the Marine Mart in Atlantic City. Gary told his father that he thought those decoys were dreadful. His dad challenged him to do better himself, which he proceeded to do. His grandfather helped him with the patterns, and his father cut them out on the band saw, which Gary was still too young to use. He did not yet have the strength to pull a drawknife, so he did most of the shaping with a rasp and knife

Gus Hickman was a neighbor of Gary's who hunted Swan Bay Point, which Gary considered the finest gunning spot on the Mullica. One day a state police captain named Al Smith, who frequently gunned with Gus, noticed Gary's decoy rig on the back of his father's sneakbox. He asked Gary to carve him a rig of decoys just like those. He carved them for Captain Smith for $35. The year was 1948, and from that day on Gary was a professional decoy carver.



Like most carvers, Gary's patterns went through changes over the years. Gary admired the decoys of Walter Bush and Jake Barrett, which greatly influenced his own carvings. They were flat bottom decoys and rode better in the water than the round bottom ones made by Tuckerton carvers. He also feels that keels hurt the action of a decoy on the water.

Gary credits his grandfather with teaching him much of what he knows about hunting and the outdoors. He had the type of woods lore and common sense that came from a lifetime spent outdoors. He disappointed Gary once when he would not let the boy bring a freshly carved drake mallard hunting. He told Gary that since mallard drakes would attempt to breed with hens all year, even black duck hens would shy away from rigs containing them, pulling the rest of the flock with them.

As Gary got older and his carving skills increased, he started to take part in the decoy shows that were beginning to become popular. At one such show in the mid 1960s, he approached Hurley Conklin and offered to trade decoys with him. Hurley asked, rather gruffly, what would he want with one of Gary's decoys? Gary was devastated, as he had great respect for Hurley. He returned to his table and shortly thereafter, Hurley approached him in a somewhat apologetic manner. It seems that he did not recognize Gary as an adult, although he had bought cedar from his father and grandfather for years. He told Gary that he didn't really collect decoys but he would be happy to give Gary one of his, on the underside of which Hurley included a personalized inscription to him.

Another famous carver whom Gary had opportunity to meet was Lem Ward. While visiting with Ward, he spotted a copy of *Ducks, Geese and Swans of North America* in Lem's shop. He commented that he had his own copy, which he prized as a reference, and was given to him by Chris Sprague. Lem suddenly became very impressed. "You knew Chris Sprague?" he exclaimed. Lem told him that Chris was one of the best decoy painters ever and taught him much of what he knew about painting. Lem in turn showed Gary a few tips on drawing patterns, especially the freehand rendition of the graceful curves of a duck's head. Freshly motivated, Gary went home and tore up his patterns and started making new ones.

A major turning point in Gary's life occurred when he met Fred and Ethyl Noyes, who established and owned Historic Smithville Village. While he was taking part in a decoy show held at the village, Ethyl stopped at Gary's table and took a liking to his carvings. She asked him how much he wanted for everything in his display, immediately accepting his offer, and allowing him to keep the carvings at his table for the duration of the show. She later stopped by while he was talking to visitors to the show. She was so impressed by his interaction with the public that she offered him a job working weekends at the village as a demonstrating carver, even giving him his pick of tools from their extensive antique tool collection. Fred and Ethyl Noyes' circle of acquaintances included many famous and influential people, many of whom Gary had the chance to meet. Many of them admired and bought carvings from Gary. This had a snowballing effect, as he gained national recognition as a carver. Gary is currently doing a carving commissioned by Christie Whitman as a gift for President Bush. It was also at Smithville where Gary met his future wife, Nikki, who was the village spinner and weaver.

Before long, Gary left his job as a lineman for Atlantic Electric to carve full time. Gary had also worked in the past as a finish carpenter. These skills came into play when he helped to design and build parts of the Noyes Museum. A major part of the museum is its decoy collection, which Gary is very familiar with, as he measured and cataloged more than 3,800 decoys in the Noyes' personal collection. Gary left Smithville after it was sold to the ABC corporation in the late 1970s and went on to become a demonstrating craftsman at Wheaton Village.

Gary was very instrumental in the formative years of the Ocean County Decoy and Gunning Show, and continues as a member of the show committee and as a contest judge. He divides his time now between carving and teaching, much of it taking place at the Swan Bay Folk Art Center, founded by him and his wife in 1988. He is a firm believer in a carver developing his own patterns and not copying those of others. He feels the best way to accomplish this is to spend as much time as possible observing and sketching ducks. ■

One of the most satisfying moments in Gary's life happened recently when a man named Brian Hartman showed up at Gary's door. Brian had met Gary years before when he was a student at Southern Regional High School and Gary was giving carving lessons. Brian informed Gary how much he appreciated and was inspired by his lessons back then, and was ready to learn more. To Gary, this was his life's biggest compliment.